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AP Language and Composition

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Independent Reading: Researched Argument

**I.** *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* is a book by Barbara Ehrenreich about the working poor in the United States. Ehrenreich, a credible author, went undercover for almost two years working at minimum wage jobs to truly experience the lower class. After traveling across the country and barely making it from paycheck to paycheck, Ehrenreich ultimately concluded that workers can absolutely not make a decent living off of minimum wage jobs. Indeed, Ehrenreich shows how only the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

**II.** Barbara Ehrenreich is an extremely credible author. Her “articles, reviews and essays have been widely published” (The New York Times). She has received several different awards for her writing, but also for her activism in politics. Some of her biggest accomplishments thus far in her career have been “a Ford Foundation Award for Humanistic Perspectives on Contemporary Society (1982), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1987-88) and a grant for Research and Writing from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (1995)” (The New York Times). Nonetheless, Ehrenreich needed none of these titles to successfully write *Nickel and Dimed*. For this book, she relied on her own experiences from working at minimum wage jobs. Because Enrenreich leads a very well to do life thanks to her writing career, critics may be quick to accuse her of not truly understanding the working poor. However, Enrenreich fully has the authority to discuss the topic as she researched and lived it for two years.

Ehrenreich began the *Nickel and Dimed* project slightly biased, but was determined to let her experience overshadow her opinions. Ehrenreich is involved with many feminine movements, and therefore one of her “more familiar themes [is] poverty” (Ehrenreich 1). Some of the questions she raises in her editorials are along the lines of, “How does anyone live on the wages available to the unskilled? [and h]ow in particular… were the roughly four million women about to be booted into the labor marker by welfare reform going to make it on $6 or $7 an hour?” (Ehrenreich 1). Therefore, Ehrenreich definitely had experience working with the subject of the working poor way before the idea of *Nickel and Dimed* ever emerged. Not to mention, she grew up as the daughter of a coalminer, whose father was also a coalminer. She had to work to become as successful and wealthy as she is now. Ehrenreich knew things were not going to be easy for her when she left her life behind to work minimum wage jobs. Still, she never anticipated that things would be so incredulously ghastly that she would devote much of her future time to campaigning and supporting the lower class.

Ehrenreich, quite possibly, had ulterior motives going into the *Nickel and Dimed* project. She almost knew certain what her final conclusion would be, and she was really only determined to prove her opinion: the working poor did not earn enough. Basically, her ulterior motive would be to prove her writing subject of many years was actually fact. Her writings of thirty years would then not be one huge joke that she made up in her mind. Still, one could also say she did not have ulterior motives. Ehrenreich definitely was not jumping at the chance to write *Nickel and Dimed* and prove her theories worthy. In fact, Ehrenreich had suggested the concept for *Nickel and Dimed* as an idea for another author or journalist. An editor she worked for, however, thought the idea would be brilliant for Enrenreich herself to accomplish and ultimately pushed her to do it. *Nickel and Dimed* is Barbara Ehrenreich’s way of proving that America needs to help the working poor; the poor cannot make it on their own. She accomplishes this by becoming part of the working poor herself. Ehrenreich left her life behind for two years to work at minimum wage jobs, live in trailer parks and hotels, and almost go broke. These were the rules Ehrenreich set for her experiment: “1: She could not fall back on any skills from her past work or education in her quest for employment. 2: She had to take the highest paying job and do her best to hold it. 3: She had to find the least expensive shelter that provided safety and privacy. 4: To the best of her ability, she had to survive on the income earned from her employment” (BookJive).

**III.** Ehrenreich primarily uses pathos to engage her readers, but also throws in a good amount of logos as far as rhetorical devices go. As Ehrenreich hops from job to job and town to town, she describes each setting and each profession she takes with extreme disappointment. The book could almost come across as a novel, for the reader becomes deeply involved with Enrenreich’s misfortunes. She introduces each coworker to the reader by sharing a certain ailment or life problem they have, she relates all of her bosses to the characteristics of Scrooge, and all of her residences come across as being the worst in the entire town. True, living off of minimum wage jobs does not at all make one wealthy. However, Ehrenreich’s descriptions almost come off exaggerated at some points. Each setting she enters is immediately stereotyped with what one would consider poverty. While the pathos is what ultimately sucks the reader in, Ehrenreich sprinkles plenty of facts into her work as a source of logos. She uses magazines, articles, and books as sources to support the claims she makes.

Despite Ehrenreich trying to make a sturdy point, *Nickel and Dimed* has flaws and weaknesses. First off, Ehrenreich already knows what the outcome of her experiment will be. Because of that, she negatively stereotypes every situation. This observance was the example of pathos used as a rhetorical device. Still, this use of pathos makes the book extremely predictable. After a few pages, the reader can easily figure out that each chapter is based in a new town, and each chapter ends when Ehrenreich in some way, shape, or form goes broke. People in the real world who suffer from poverty usually can’t just pick up and start over again when they suddenly realize they don’t like their job or cannot find a cheap enough residency. In this way, Ehrenreich comes off as a bit unrealistic.

Conversely, Ehrenreich does in fact inform the reader about the working poor. Whether one agrees with the realness of Ehrenreich’s project, the reader cannot deny *Nickel and Dimed* has left them aware to some of the situations of the working poor. Actually, Ehrenreich ends *Nickel and Dimed* by sharing some of the letters she has received in response to the book by everyday readers. *Nickel and Dimed* has caused a revolution among politicians and businesses as well. Ehrenreich often makes public appearances to discuss her experiences in writing the book. After *Nickel and Dimed* was published, “the federal minimum wage [was raised] from $5.15 to $5.85 an hour [and furthermore] is slated to hit $7.25 in 2009” (Ehrenreich 234). Ehrenreich’s other strength is that she actually did put in a lot of work and time to write *Nickel and Dimed*. Ehrenreich herself states, “all in all, with some demerits for screwups and gold stars for effort, I think it’s fair to say that as a worker, a jobholder, I deserve a B or maybe B+” (Ehrenreich 196).

**IV.** Some who have opposed the views of *Nickel and Dimed* have written their own experiences as a counterargument. For example, author Adam Shepard “was inspired after reading [*Nickel and Dimed*]” and decided to take on his own challenge similar to that of Ehrenreich’s (Smith). “Unlike Ms. Ehrenreich, who chronicled the difficulty of advancing beyond the ranks of the working poor, Shepard found he was able to successfully climb out of his self-imposed poverty” (Smith). Shepard left his lifestyle with only the clothes he was wearing and twenty-five dollars in his pocket. Another counterargument is that of Charles Platt. Platt stated, “Somehow [Ehrenreich’s] book didn’t ring true to me, and I wondered to what extent a preconceived agenda might have biased her reporting. Hence my application for a job at the nearest Wal-Mart” (Platt). Platt admits he was not well-paid, but that the Wal-Mart company treated him with nothing but kindness and respect.

Adam Shepard’s argument conflicts the most with the Ehrenreich’s ideas. Shepard in fact, chronicled his experience into his own book, *Scratch Beginnings: Me, $25, and the Search for the American Dream*. “The book, he says, is a testament to what ordinary Americans can achieve” (Smith). Shepard took primarily the same steps as Ehrenreich, yet still ended up having an apartment, a car, and a savings account after only ten months. What Shephard did do differently though was live in a shelter, not in an apartment or motel, and collect food stamps. He even found “work as a day laborer, which led to a steady job with a moving company” (Smith). The possible reason Shepard was more successful is that he started out his journey at the lowest of lows and worked his way up the ladder of status. Ehrenreich never allowed herself time to collect money; she always needed to spend it whether it be for housing or food.

While Platt still has a valid counterargument to Ehrenreich, his is more subtle than Shephard’s. Platt’s main point is to show that while Ehrenreich may have some truth to her words, overall she does not tell the whole story. An example of this would be how “[e]ach successfully completed course added an increment to [Platt’s] hourly wage, [which is] a policy... Barbara Ehrenreich somehow forgot to mention in her book” (Platt). However, Platt does not always conflict with Ehrenreich. He does say, “I was not well paid”, which is the main point Ehrenreich was out to prove (Platt). However, Platt finishes this statement by saying, “…but Wal-Mart is hardly unique in paying a low hourly rate to entry-level retail staff. The answer to this problem seems elusive to Barbara Ehrenreich, yet is obvious to any teenager who enrolls in a vocational institute” (Platt). Platt did not write a book response to *Nickel and Dimed* as did Adam Shepard, but he did write a journal response.

**V.** Overall, Ehrenreich’s position comes off as the most agreeable. Her main focus is to show readers that people who work at minimum wage do not earn enough, and with that, she succeeds. While many argue over the choices Ehrenreich made during her experiment and that she herself failed, all of the other people portrayed in *Nickel and Dimed* are real life examples. Simply reading about Ehrenreich’s coworkers is enough to prove that these workers do not get by. *Nickel and Dimed* is a prime illustration of how minimum wage is not enough for those depending on it.

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